

From Procrastination to Humiliation

by Prof. Joe Martin

As a college student, there are numerous obstacles you have to overcome, from poor professors to raunchy roommates. But if you were to ask any student about his or her biggest college challenge, he or she would probably say (quicker than you can lose a college parking spot), “**Procrastination!**” That’s right, it’s that old dreaded “P” word.

And why should you be surprised? With all that “free time” on your hands, who could blame you for blowing off studying, not starting your research assignment, putting off writing your report, or not going by the professor’s office to talk about your progress (or lack of)?

Of course, I’m being facetious when I say “free time,” but I’m not entirely out in left field. If you haven’t tried our RWU “**Time Calculator**,” you need to. The fact of the matter is, we tend to have more “free” time on our hands than we’d really like to admit. Even yours truly (the professor) has lost a few bouts with the procrastination predator -- and will continue to do so.

And that’s the bad thing about procrastination, you never “really” defeat it. When you think you’ve beat it, it’s like a monster from a bad sci-fi movie, it comes back to life (it never dies). Sometimes, the only thing we can do is to try to out run it.

However, one of the best ways I’ve found to “out run” procrastination (or at least hide from it), is to paint myself in a corner **BEFORE** I start doing it. I call this the “**humiliation principle**.” Allow me to set up the principle before I actually explain it.

According to most human behavior specialists (i.e., those high-paid people with the long couches), there are two reasons why we do everything . . . and they do mean everything: 1.) our desire to **gain PLEASURE**; or 2.) our desire to **avoid PAIN** (i.e., fear of). That’s what motivates us, pain and pleasure!

Unfortunately, most people will do more to avoid pain than they would to gain pleasure. Just think about it, most people would work harder to STOP you from stealing \$100,000 from them than they would to SAVE \$100,000 for themselves, from scratch. It’s just in our nature. Here’s another way of looking at it. Most people would rather work on a job they DON’T like, than take a risk to create a job (i.e., start a business) that they DO like. Questions like, “What if I fail?” will invariably pop up. Remember, failure is painful.

Still not convinced? How about this, most students will do more NOT TO FAIL a course than they would to GET AN “A” in a course. See my point? The key is to learn how to manipulate this law of motivation so it works for you instead of against you.

Now that you understand this law, let’s go back to the “*paint-yourself-in-a-corner-humiliation-principle*” idea I mentioned earlier.

Whenever I find myself about to procrastinate on something (which is fairly often), I immediately find a way to paint myself into a corner so I won’t do it. In fact, procrastinating on the “dreaded” task would cause me both humiliation and some emotional pain (which I don’t want). Allow me to share two true examples

with you, one as a student and another as a professor. **WARNING:** Do not try this at school unless you REALLY want to stop procrastinating -- it could prove harmful to your emotional health:

Example 1: As a Student:

One semester, I found myself not getting the kind of grades I knew I could be getting in a relatively easy class (public speaking). The fact of the matter was, since I had pretty good oratorical skills, I didn't prepare the way I probably should have. To be painfully honest, I didn't prepare at all. Since this was an "easy" class for me, I just coasted, and my grades were a reflection of that (low B's on the first two presentations). However, I knew I was blowing a great opportunity to get an "A" out of the course and raise my GPA.

Well, I said to myself, "Enough's enough, I'm going to stop procrastinating and start preparing for my next speech." Unfortunately, I had said the exact same thing about the previous two speeches. But this time, I decided to try a new approach.

After the speaking order was assigned, I immediately (and intentionally) told two of my classmates that I was going to have the "best" presentation in the class. I went on to say, "In fact, if I don't give the best presentation and receive the highest grade in class on it, I'll give each of you \$20." Now let me explain something to you, I didn't have \$40 to lose (I was broke as a joke), and it would take me months to try and pay it back if I failed to produce (but I knew that -- and that's why I did it). By putting myself, my word and my ego on the line, I now had the leverage I needed to get off my butt and start preparing, practicing and producing.

To make a long story short, I DID start preparing (that same night up until the day of the presentation), and I DID give the best presentation in our class (I received a score of 98). Now you may ask, "Well Joe, what did you get from your friends for being right?" The answer is "nothing." I didn't ask them to give me anything if I was right -- the burden was entirely on my shoulders. That's the **humiliation principle: put yourself, your reputation, and your ego on the line so you won't back down.** I can't guarantee that this principle will work for you, but it certainly did for me.

Example #2: As a Professor:

I don't know about you, but I'm not a morning person, but rather a "night owl." As I sit here typing this article, it is 2:00 a.m. in the morning. But unfortunately, like most Americans, I usually have to be to work early in the morning (8 or 9:00 a.m. -- Hey, that's early for me). Being a professor, it's so easy to "sleep in" a little late or drag yourself into class late once in a while (there are no consequences).

Well, this is another form of procrastination (as subtle as it may be), and it's also a poor example to set for my students (who I require to be in class on time or else). I knew this sort of thing could be a problem when I first started teaching, so I had to DO something about before it actually did. That's right, I had to revert to the humiliation principle! I had to paint myself in a corner so I

would NOT procrastinate. Hey, it worked as a college student, so why wouldn't it work as a professor? Therefore, I put in place a strict lateness policy, which has now been in effect for me over the past seven years.

It states, and I quote, "For each day that **I** am late to class, whether it's by one minute or one second, I will add five points to **your** test grade (including final exams). No excuses." So realistically speaking, within any given week, the class could possibly receive a total of 15 points added to his or her test grade. What a deal, right? . . . for them. But what did that do for me? It got me to get off my butt every morning so I would be in class on time EVERY DAY. In more than seven years, (and who knows how many classes), I've been late to class three times. And those were all evening classes. I've NEVER been late for an 8:00 a.m. class -- go figure.

Look at what I was facing: if I was late, not only would I have to give my students "unearned" points for their exam, I would be humiliated and embarrassed that I couldn't live up to my own standards. Does this make sense? This technique is not for the meek and timid. However, I can't argue the results that I've gotten from it. I now employ this technique in other areas of my life . . . my marriage, my business, and my friendships. I want people to know that when I make a promise, neither procrastination, laziness nor apathy will ever stop me from keeping it.

If you'd like for me to help you with a specific procrastination problem, please write me and tell me about it. There's "nothing" that you're putting off to the last minute that I can't help you build leverage on (see, I did it again -- it's become a habit). Also, if you have an effective technique for dealing with procrastination that you would like to share, please E-mail it to us. If we like it, we'd love to share it with others.

Living Purposefully – Prof. Joe Martin

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